

‘Don’s Best Friend’: How Epstein and Trump Bonded Over the Pursuit of Women

The president has tried to minimize their friendship, but documents and interviews reveal an intense and complicated relationship.

By Nicholas Confessore, Julie Tate

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Jeffrey Epstein was a “terrific guy” and “a lot of fun to be with.” He and Donald J. Trump also had “no formal relationship.” They went to a lot of the same parties. But they “did not socialize together.” They were never really friends, just business acquaintances. Or “there was no relationship” at all. “I was not a fan of his, that I can tell you.”

For nearly a quarter-century, Mr. Trump and his representatives have offered shifting, often contradictory accounts of his relationship with Mr. Epstein, one sporadically captured by society photographers and in news clips before they fell out sometime in the mid-2000s. Closely scrutinized since Mr. Epstein died in a Manhattan jail cell during Mr. Trump’s first term, their friendship — and questions about what the president knew of Mr.

Epstein's abuses — now threatens to consume his second one.

The controversy has shaken Mr. Trump's iron hold on his base like no other. Loyal supporters have demanded to know why the administration has not moved more quickly to unearth the convicted sex offender's remaining secrets. In November, after resisting months of pressure to release more Epstein-related documents held by the federal government — and facing an almost unheard-of revolt among Republican lawmakers — Mr. Trump reversed himself, signing legislation that requires their release beginning this week.

Mr. Epstein had a talent for acquiring powerful friends, some of whom have become ensnared in the continuing scrutiny of his crimes. For months, Mr. Trump has labored furiously to shift himself out of the frame, dismissing questions about his relationship with Mr. Epstein as a “Democrat hoax” and imploring his supporters to ignore the matter entirely. An examination of their history by The New York Times has found no evidence implicating Mr. Trump in Mr. Epstein's abuse and trafficking of minors.

But the two men's relationship was both far closer and far more complex than the president now admits.

Beginning in the late 1980s, the two men forged a bond intense enough to leave others who knew them with the impression that they were each other's closest friend, The Times found. Mr. Epstein was then a little-known financier who cultivated mystery around the scope and source of his self-made wealth. Mr. Trump, six years older, was a real estate scion who relished publicity and exaggerated his

successes. Neither man drank or did drugs. They pursued women in a game of ego and dominance. Female bodies were currency.

Over nearly two decades, as Mr. Trump cut a swath through the party circuits of New York and Florida, Mr. Epstein was perhaps his most reliable wingman. During the 1990s and early 2000s, they prowled Mr. Epstein's Manhattan mansion and Mr. Trump's Plaza Hotel, at least one of Mr. Trump's Atlantic City casinos and both their Palm Beach homes. They visited each other's offices and spoke often by phone, according to other former Epstein employees and women who spent time in his homes.

With other men, Mr. Epstein might discuss tax shelters, international affairs or neuroscience. With Mr. Trump, he talked about sex.

“I just think it was trophy hunting,” Stacey Williams, who rose to fame as a star of the Sports Illustrated swimsuit editions during the 1990s, said in an interview with The Times. In social media posts and interviews with news outlets in recent years, Ms. Williams has described how Mr. Trump groped her in 1993 at Trump Tower while Mr. Epstein — whom she was then dating — watched. “I think Jeffrey liked that he had this Sports Illustrated model who had this name, and that Trump was pursuing me,” she said. Mr. Trump has denied her account.

To shed light on their friendship, The Times interviewed more than 30 former Epstein employees, victims of his abuse and others who crossed paths with the two men over the years. The Times also obtained new documents that

illuminate their relationship and scoured court documents and other public records.

Many of the people interviewed by The Times asked to share their stories anonymously, saying they feared for their safety at the hands of supporters of Mr. Trump, a president who has deployed the might of the federal government to target and punish his political opponents. Some Epstein victims have already received death threats for demanding a full accounting of the government's investigations, according to a statement released by more than two dozen of them last month.



Mr. Trump, his children Eric and Ivanka, and Mr. Epstein in 1993, attending the opening of the Harley-Davidson Cafe in Manhattan. Credit...Dafydd Jones

Over the years, Mr. Epstein or his partner, Ghislaine Maxwell, introduced at least six women who have accused them of grooming or abuse to Mr. Trump, according to interviews, court testimony and other records. One was a

minor at the time. None have accused Mr. Trump himself of inappropriate behavior.

One of the women, who has never before spoken publicly about the experience, told The Times that Mr. Epstein had coerced her into attending four parties at Mr. Epstein's home. Mr. Trump attended all four, the woman said. At two of them, she said, Mr. Epstein directed her to have sex with other male guests.

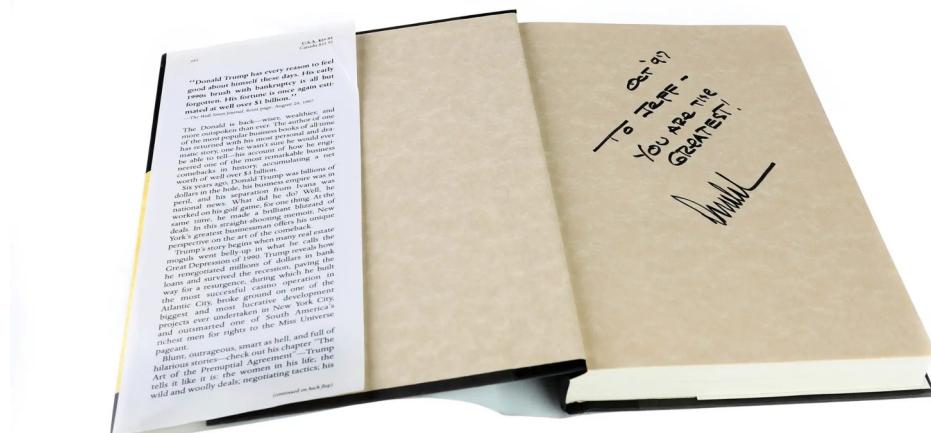
In an email among those released by Congress in November, Mr. Epstein boasted that he "gave" Mr. Trump a 20-year-old woman whom Mr. Epstein dated in the 1990s. During a flight together in the early 1990s, Mr. Trump came on to another Epstein employee traveling with them, telling her that he could have anyone he wanted, according to a different Epstein worker who learned of the incident. A separate Epstein employee from that era recalled that Mr. Trump would occasionally send over modeling cards for Mr. Epstein to peruse, like a menu.

Mr. Epstein, who claimed he required three orgasms a day, exploited or abused hundreds of women and girls before dying in what was ruled a suicide. Mr. Trump does not stand accused of sexually abusing a minor. But over the course of his friendship with Mr. Epstein and beyond, he left a trail of alleged abuse and assault, many details of which began to surface publicly during his successful 2016 presidential campaign.

Close to 20 women have publicly accused Mr. Trump of groping, forcibly kissing or sexually assaulting them — behavior that he once bragged he could get away with because of his celebrity but later denied ever engaging in.

In 2023, the writer E. Jean Carroll won a \$5 million civil judgment against Mr. Trump for sexual abuse and defamation.

In response to a detailed list of questions from The Times, the White House press secretary, Karoline Leavitt, issued a statement: “This fake news story, which is not worth the paper it’s printed on, is just another stale regurgitation of decades-old false allegations against President Trump. The truth will remain the same no matter how many times The New York Times tries to change it. President Trump did nothing wrong, and he kicked Jeffrey Epstein out of Mar-a-Lago for being a creep.”



A copy of “Trump: The Art of the Comeback” that was inscribed by the future president to Mr. Epstein in 1997. Credit...Alessandra Montalto/The New York Times

It is unclear what new information may emerge under the new law passed by Congress. The statute allows the Trump administration to withhold records that identify victims, including images of child sexual abuse, or documents that

are otherwise classified. His appointees can also hold back records that could jeopardize an active federal investigation — such as a new inquiry ordered by Mr. Trump into Democrats associated with Mr. Epstein. In a statement in late November, a group of Epstein accusers wrote, “Other than redacting victim names, we want all the files disclosed.”

Mr. Trump has denied knowing of Mr. Epstein’s abuse of underage girls. But in a tranche of emails released in November, Mr. Epstein suggested otherwise. In a 2019 message to the journalist Michael Wolff, he wrote of Mr. Trump, “of course he knew about the girls as he asked ghislaine to stop.” The full context of Mr. Epstein’s remark is unclear.

In a 2010 deposition, Mr. Epstein was asked if he had ever socialized with Mr. Trump with girls under 18. As he did more than three dozen times during the deposition, Mr. Epstein invoked his constitutional right not to answer.

“Though I’d like to answer that question, at least today, I’m going to have to assert my Fifth, Sixth and 14th Amendment rights, sir,” he replied.

Sex Talk and Office Hours

Sometimes the phone would ring in Mr. Trump’s office at Trump Tower. The caller — “the mysterious Jeffrey,” as Mr. Trump described him in a 2004 book of business advice — never gave a last name, nor did he need to, Mr. Trump wrote. A few times a week, the phone would ring in Mr. Epstein’s office in the Villard Houses on Madison Avenue. Mr. Trump would be on the line. On one occasion, recalled

an Epstein assistant from the mid-1990s, Mr. Trump refused to give any name at all.

The White House spokeswoman declined to say whether Mr. Trump's book was referring to a different Jeffrey. But the two talked at least three times a week during the mid-to-late 1990s, according to a second Epstein assistant from that period.

The first assistant, who often worked late, recalled that sometimes, when the office emptied out, Mr. Epstein would check to see that she was at her desk and put Mr. Trump on speaker. Mr. Trump, she said, seemed to enjoy regaling Mr. Epstein with tales of his sexual exploits. And Mr. Epstein seemed to delight in how uncomfortable it made her to overhear them.

She remembered one call in the mid-1990s on which the two men discussed how much pubic hair a particular woman had, and whether there was enough for Mr. Epstein to floss his teeth with. On another, Mr. Trump told Mr. Epstein about having sex with another woman on a pool table, the former assistant said.

A woman known in court records as Jane Doe, whom Mr. Epstein trafficked during the mid-1990s, beginning in her early teens, testified in Ms. Maxwell's criminal trial in 2021 that Mr. Epstein often put famous friends on speakerphone in front of other people.

The calls with Mr. Trump continued through the later years of the men's friendship, according to a third former employee, who worked for Mr. Epstein on and off through most of the 2000s and also recalled him putting Mr.

Trump on speaker. They would talk about pageants or modeling shows or which countries' women were in vogue in the fashion world. Sometimes, the third employee said, Mr. Trump went on so long that Mr. Epstein — whose attention span was famously short — would leave the room while his friend was still talking.

Maria Farmer, an artist who has said she was sexually assaulted by Ms. Maxwell and Mr. Epstein during the mid-1990s, [told The Times in 2019](#) that Mr. Epstein had once summoned her to meet Mr. Trump at the Villard Houses office. Mr. Trump leered at her, she said, before Mr. Epstein informed him that “she’s not for you.”



Mr. Trump with Mr. Epstein's partner, Ghislaine Maxwell, at a New York fashion show in 2000. Credit...Patrick McMullan,

This summer, a spokesman for Mr. [Trump denied](#) that the [president](#) had ever set foot in Mr. Epstein's office. The first former assistant, though, recalled Mr. Trump meeting there briefly with Mr. Epstein at least several times during the mid-1990s. Her account was supported by Mark Epstein,

Mr. Epstein's brother, who said that Jeffrey had told him that Mr. Trump visited him frequently.

"He was in the office all the time back then," Mr. Epstein said in an interview with The Times.

Daily handwritten notes kept by the first former assistant and reviewed by The Times suggest that Mr. Trump was a regular presence in Mr. Epstein's life. The notes, spanning several months in late 1994, have not been previously reported.

Some pages contain instructions to call Mr. Trump or return his call. One note reminded the assistant to call Mr. Trump's office to see if he was "flying to Fla tomorrow." Another recorded that a package would be arriving with an invitation to a Mar-a-Lago event.

On one page are instructions about invitations for an upcoming party. Mr. Trump was to be invited — but only if his ex-wife Ivana, with whom Ms. Maxwell was friendly, declined.

Their relationship was riddled with undertones of envy and disdain. Mr. Epstein seemed to hold a low opinion of his friend's business acumen, according to the former employees and others who knew him. On one occasion around 2001, the third former employee said, Mr. Epstein was annoyed after Mr. Trump called him. He later told the employee that Mr. Trump was short on cash and wanted a ride on Mr. Epstein's plane.

During the early years of their friendship, Mr. Trump was racing toward a reckoning over the billions of dollars he had borrowed to assemble his struggling empire, including casinos, hotels, an airline and a yacht. According to former Epstein employees, Mr. Trump seemed attracted to the financier's wealth and business network.

It is unclear whether Mr. Epstein — who ostensibly specialized in offering tax and estate planning for wealthy clients — helped Mr. Trump navigate his financial problems. But in his 2020 memoir of representing Epstein victims, "Relentless Pursuit," the Florida lawyer Bradley J. Edwards wrote that Mr. Epstein had claimed to some young women that he had bailed his friend out of bankruptcy. Even as he dismissed Mr. Trump's deal-making, Mr. Epstein — who could be socially awkward at other people's parties — seemed to admire his friend's brash confidence and access to higher realms of nightlife and celebrity. He frequently mentioned his friendship with Mr. Trump, according to several accusers, telling one he had a bedroom reserved at Mar-a-Lago. Even after they fell out, Mr. Epstein kept a framed photo of himself with Mr. Trump and his future third wife, Melania, on a credenza in his Upper East Side dining room.

The Party Circuit

A few years into Mr. Trump's friendship with Mr. Epstein, Ivana Trump filed for divorce. Mr. Trump's affair with Marla Maples, a former pageant contestant, was running hot and cold. In 1992, he invited NBC to Mar-a-Lago to shoot video for a feature about his post-divorce life on the talk show "A Closer Look."

"I love beautiful women, I love going out with beautiful women and I love women in general," he said in the footage.

The cameras captured him and Mr. Epstein at the Palm Beach estate, surrounded by cheerleaders from the Miami Dolphins and Buffalo Bills. In the video, Mr. Trump grabs a smiling woman from the rear and pats her on the behind; in another clip, he appears to point toward women on the dance floor, and Mr. Epstein doubles over laughing at something his friend has whispered.



Mr. Trump and Mr. Epstein appeared at Mar-a-Lago, in Florida, during an NBC feature in 1992. Credit...via YouTube

In January 1993, Mr. Trump held another party at Mar-a-Lago, this one to kick off a beauty pageant he was bringing to Atlantic City with two business partners, George Houraney and Jill Harth. Two dozen or so potential contestants were flown in to meet Mr. Trump. The only other guest at the party, Mr. Houraney [told](#) The Times in 2019, was Mr. Epstein.

During dinner that night, Ms. Harth alleged in a 1997 lawsuit, Mr. Trump groped her under the table, then cornered her in a bedroom normally used by his daughter Ivanka and “forcibly kissed, fondled and restrained” her from leaving.

Later, in the predawn hours, she alleged in the suit, Mr. Trump also sneaked into a bedroom being used by a 22-year-old contestant. Climbing into her bed uninvited, he groped her, too, according to the suit.

Mr. Trump has denied the allegations by Ms. Harth, who declined to comment. The pageant partnership later fizzled, leading Mr. Houraney to separately sue Mr. Trump in 1995 for breach of contract. Ms. Harth [said she withdrew](#) her subsequent harassment lawsuit as a condition for settling the contract dispute. She went on to briefly date Mr. Trump.

According to Mr. Epstein, he and Mr. Trump partied at his house, too. In a 2015 email exchange with Landon Thomas Jr., then a Times reporter, he recounted a moment when Mr. Trump was so focused on young women swimming in his pool that he walked into a glass door. Mr. Epstein also referred to the 22-year-old contestant from that night in 1993, indicating she had pictures of “donald and girls in bikinis in my kitchen” and providing her email address.

The emails, among those released by Congress last month, came as Mr. Trump led in the polls for the Republican presidential nomination. Mr. Thomas, who had once pitched Mr. Epstein on a sympathetic profile, said he was being approached by people who thought he had “juicy info on you and Trump.”

It is unclear whether the photos Mr. Epstein referenced exist. The former contestant could not be reached for comment. The Times is withholding her name because she has not publicly come forward with her own account of the events. (Mr. Thomas has said he never received any photographs; he left The Times in 2019 after disclosing that he had solicited a charitable contribution from Mr. Epstein.)

In November 1993, Mr. Trump’s chosen pageant contestants flew in from around the world for a week of events at his properties in New York and Atlantic City. At one point, Ms. Harth said in her lawsuit, Mr. Trump demanded that she provide him with “access” to a 17-year-old Czech contestant. The suit does not say if she complied or if Mr. Trump met the contestant.

Toward the end of the week, the contestants joined Mr. Trump for a press luncheon at the Plaza. One contestant, Béatrice Keul, then a bank employee and part-time model from Switzerland, said in an interview with The Times that during the event, one of Mr. Trump's employees asked her to meet privately with him in a suite upstairs. Almost as soon as she arrived, Ms. Keul said, Mr. Trump began groping her, kissing her and trying to lift her dress. "I yelled, I screamed, I pushed him," she said. "He didn't want to give up."



Béatrice Keul with Mr. Trump at a pageant event in 1993. Credit...via Béatrice Keul

She said she was withholding some details of what happened because she had been subject to anonymous threats. Ms. Keul first described aspects of the episode to [The Daily Mail last year](#). A friend, Pascal Claivaz, told The Times that Ms. Keul recounted the episode at the Plaza to him around 2004. Ms. Keul also provided The Times with pictures of documents corroborating her participation in the pageant and of herself with Mr. Trump.

Before the private meeting, she was also approached by Mr. Epstein.

“I’m Jeffrey. I’m Don’s best friend,” she recalled him saying. She was confused at first, Ms. Keul said, because he didn’t seem to be affiliated with the pageant. She didn’t understand why he had been allowed into the press luncheon. “He said, ‘Don likes you very much,’ and that they were organizing parties at Mar-a-Lago and he would love me to join,” Ms. Keul said. He would take care of her, her flights, her hotel. “You just need to pack and come to the party at Mar-a-Lago,” she recalled him saying.

When Ms. Keul demurred, Mr. Epstein tried other tactics — going on about the wealth he kept in Swiss banks, then about famous friends with whom he could arrange meetings.

“Epstein knew exactly what he was doing,” she said. “He had a hunting method. It was a routine.”

The first of Mr. Epstein's former assistants interviewed by The Times said that on dozens of occasions in the mid-1990s, the financier instructed her to call a pageant winner from somewhere in the world and invite her to visit him in Florida. His standing offer, the assistant said, was an all-expenses-paid trip and \$5,000 in cash to go shopping on Worth Avenue, Palm Beach's famed shopping destination.

In December 1993, not long after the pageant, Mr. Trump married Ms. Maples at the Plaza. [Photos show Mr. Epstein in attendance](#). But the parties continued.

'Dress Sexy'

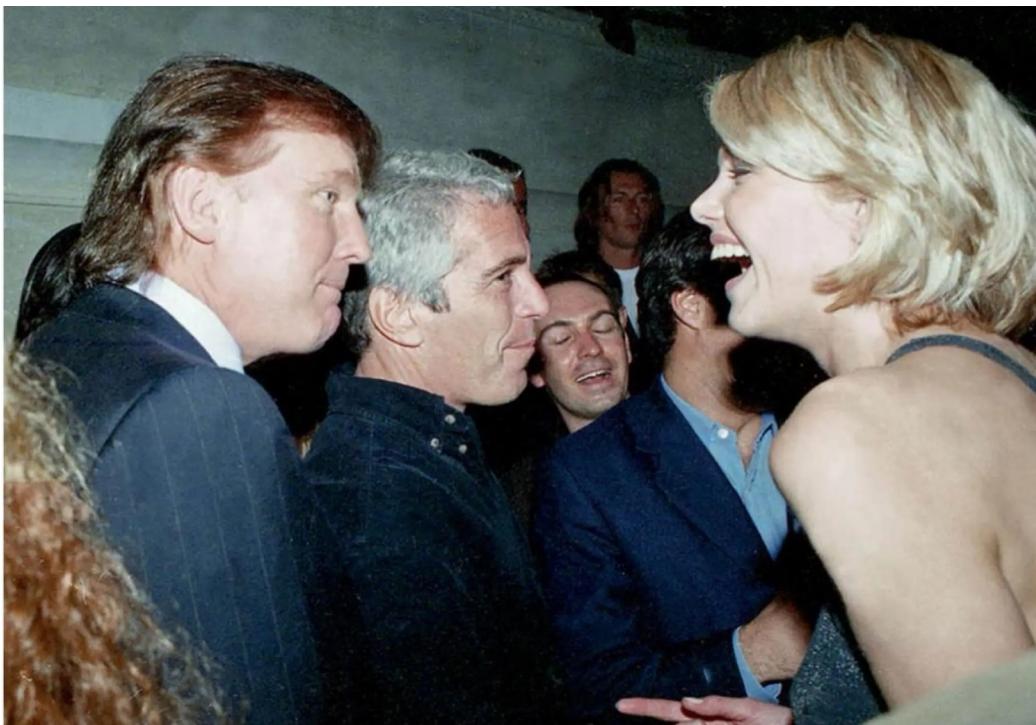
In the early 2000s, guests mingled in the library or dining room of Mr. Epstein's Upper East Side mansion as their host held court. The women were beautiful and numerous.

The men were older and few. Occasionally, one of the women would head toward the bedrooms. One of the men would shortly follow.

One woman, then a model and college student in her early 20s living in Manhattan, said she attended four parties at the mansion. She cannot recall the names of most of the men she met at the gatherings, not even those Mr. Epstein directed her to "take care of" at two of them. Recruited by Ms. Maxwell and then abused by Mr. Epstein, she buried her shame and kept their secrets for years. But Mr. Trump's presence stood out, she told The Times. He was a household name, someone Mr. Epstein often bragged about to the women around him, yet also seemed to compete with.

“It was like a pissing contest — who had the most women,” she recalled. She requested anonymity to describe her experiences in detail, saying she feared for her family’s safety after Mr. Trump said some of his critics could be [executed for sedition](#).

To people in the modeling business, men like Mr. Trump and Mr. Epstein were a familiar part of the scene: wealthy men who used their money, clout and personal connections in fashion to meet the young women who worked in the industry. “Two days a week, you’d be at a model dinner at a restaurant,” said Heather Braden, a [model and filmmaker](#). “And there’d be these men we didn’t know.” Ms. Braden, who now lives in Utah, said she often saw Mr. Trump and Mr. Epstein at the same parties or dinners during the 1990s in New York and South Florida, including at Mar-a-Lago, which Mr. Trump converted to a members’ club in 1995.



Mr. Trump and Mr. Epstein at a Victoria’s Secret party in New York in 1997. Credit...House Oversight Democrats

Each man cultivated relationships that in turn put them in proximity to young women in the industry. Mr. Epstein exploited his close relationship with Les Wexner, the owner of Victoria's Secret, sometimes telling women he could get them meetings or bookings. Photographers or camera crews captured Mr. Epstein and Mr. Trump together at Victoria's Secret events in 1997 and 1999.

Mr. Trump befriended the Hawaiian Tropic founder Ron Rice, who told [The Boston Globe](#) that he would send models and pageant contestants to Mar-a-Lago for parties at Mr. Trump's request, and John Casablancas, the founder of Elite Model Management, whose Look of the Year contest Mr. Trump sponsored and helped judge in the early 1990s.

For Mar-a-Lago gatherings, groups of models were sometimes bused in from Miami, often with help from Mr. Trump's friend Jason Binn, a co-founder of the society magazine Ocean Drive. Mr. Binn did not return calls and emails seeking comment.

Tina Davis, who worked with Ford Models in the mid-1990s, said in an interview that her Ford booker instructed her to get dressed up and attend a Mar-a-Lago party in late 1994. Just 14 and new to Miami, she was told to "dress sexy," according to her mother, Sandra Coleman, who had accompanied her to Florida. Eight or nine other models came along on the bus. "All the girls were really young," Ms. Coleman recalled in an interview. "Some of them could have been in training bras."

When they arrived at Mar-a-Lago, Ms. Coleman said, her daughter was promptly handed a glass of champagne. She took it away, but waiters kept offering more. Each time one of the middle-aged men at the party approached her daughter, Ms. Coleman would walk over and introduce herself as Ms. Davis's mother.

During a trip to the bathroom, they ran into Mr. Trump's new wife, whom they had met earlier. Ms. Maples clasped her hands, Ms. Coleman recalled, and looked her in the eye. "Whatever you do, do not let her around any of these men, and especially my husband," she told Ms. Coleman. "Protect her."

Ms. Maples denied making the comment. "I would always protect young women in any way I could," she said, "but I am sure I didn't specifically say that about my daughter's father."

Mr. Epstein was a frequent guest at Mar-a-Lago parties. A woman who said Mr. Epstein trafficked her in the late 1990s and early 2000s recalled attending at least a half-dozen of the parties, beginning when she was 17 and modeling during the winter fashion season in Florida. Mr. Epstein showed up at several of them, too. He always seemed to know about events happening at Mar-a-Lago, she said, even when he did not attend, and was always curious about her experiences.



Mr. Trump, Melania Trump and Jason Binn at the White House Correspondents' Association dinner in 2015

The invitations typically came from Mr. Binn and Ocean Drive, bidding the models “to be Donald Trump’s guest at Mar-a-Lago,” according to one invitation she shared with The Times. The parties were open-bar, and no one checked IDs, she said. Mr. Trump was “always all over” them, she recalled.

The woman provided a picture of herself and a friend with Mr. Trump at Mar-a-Lago. She said she did not remember whether she was still 17 at the time of the picture. She has

not previously spoken publicly about meeting the future president, and asked for anonymity because she feared retaliation from him or his supporters.

During the 1990s, both Mr. Epstein and Mr. Trump also forged ties with an up-and-coming modeling agency known as Next and its co-founder Faith Kates, who would become one of the industry's major figures.

Mr. Epstein was sometimes seen around Next office meetings, according to Ms. Braden, who was represented by an agency that merged with Next in the early 1990s. (After Mr. Epstein's death, [several former employees](#) told The Daily Beast that they had seen Mr. Epstein around the Next offices or taken calls from him; after he was arrested in Florida for soliciting underage girls, he also donated money to a charity founded by Ms. Kates.) Mr. Trump attended Next parties in New York, according to a former model who was represented by the agency in the late 1990s and said she once found herself seated near Mr. Trump at the agency's holiday dinner.

The agency also sometimes sent models to parties at Mar-a-Lago. Zoë Brock, a New Zealand model who worked for Next in Miami, said she was pressured by the agency to attend one of Mr. Trump's parties in 1998, when she was 24. When she balked, a representative of the agency offered to pay her a few hundred dollars to attend.

Not long after, she said, she boarded a bus with 20 or so other models. At Mar-a-Lago, each woman was given a red-and-white striped wristband, advertising them, Ms. Brock felt, as "meat." None of the other guests — chiefly men in tuxedos — wore the wristbands. The women were

made to line up and meet Mr. Trump.

“I had a glass of champagne, and I immediately felt not well,” Ms. Brock recalled, adding, “I thought my drink had been spiked.”

It was Ms. Kates who had brought her client Ms. Williams to the 1992 dinner where she first met Mr. Epstein, some months after she made her Sports Illustrated debut. And it was Ms. Kates who brought her to Mr. Trump’s annual holiday party at the Plaza that fall, where she ran into Mr. Epstein again — and where Mr. Trump also vied for her attention, praising her recent spread in the swimsuit issue, Ms. Williams said.

“I think they were trying to get as high up the chain of models as far as they could,” Ms. Williams said. “They wanted the biggest prize, the most famous model.”

But it was Mr. Epstein — not Mr. Trump — to whom she gave her number. One day the following year, as they strolled down Fifth Avenue, Mr. Epstein proposed visiting his friend in Trump Tower.

The real purpose of the visit, Ms. Williams later came to believe, was to play a game. As the two friends stood talking in Mr. Trump’s waiting room, she said, the real estate developer pulled her toward him and groped her breasts, waist and buttocks.

Mr. Epstein acted like nothing had happened. After they left, though, he flew into a rage, berating Ms. Williams for letting Mr. Trump touch her.

“I’m convinced that’s why he walked me in there,” she said

in a recent interview. “He thought I would punch him in the face or something. But I froze.” (A Trump representative previously called her allegations “unequivocally false.”)

Ms. Kates departed Next in November, after emails released by Congress indicated that she and Mr. Epstein had remained close for years after his 2008 plea deal on charges of soliciting a minor.

A Next spokeswoman declined to answer questions sent by email, instead sending a statement that the agency “has never had a business relationship with Jeffrey Epstein or Donald Trump.”

Ms. Kates also declined to answer specific questions. “Neither Faith nor anyone associated with Next ever brought clients to parties or dinners for any inappropriate purpose,” a spokesman for Ms. Kates said.

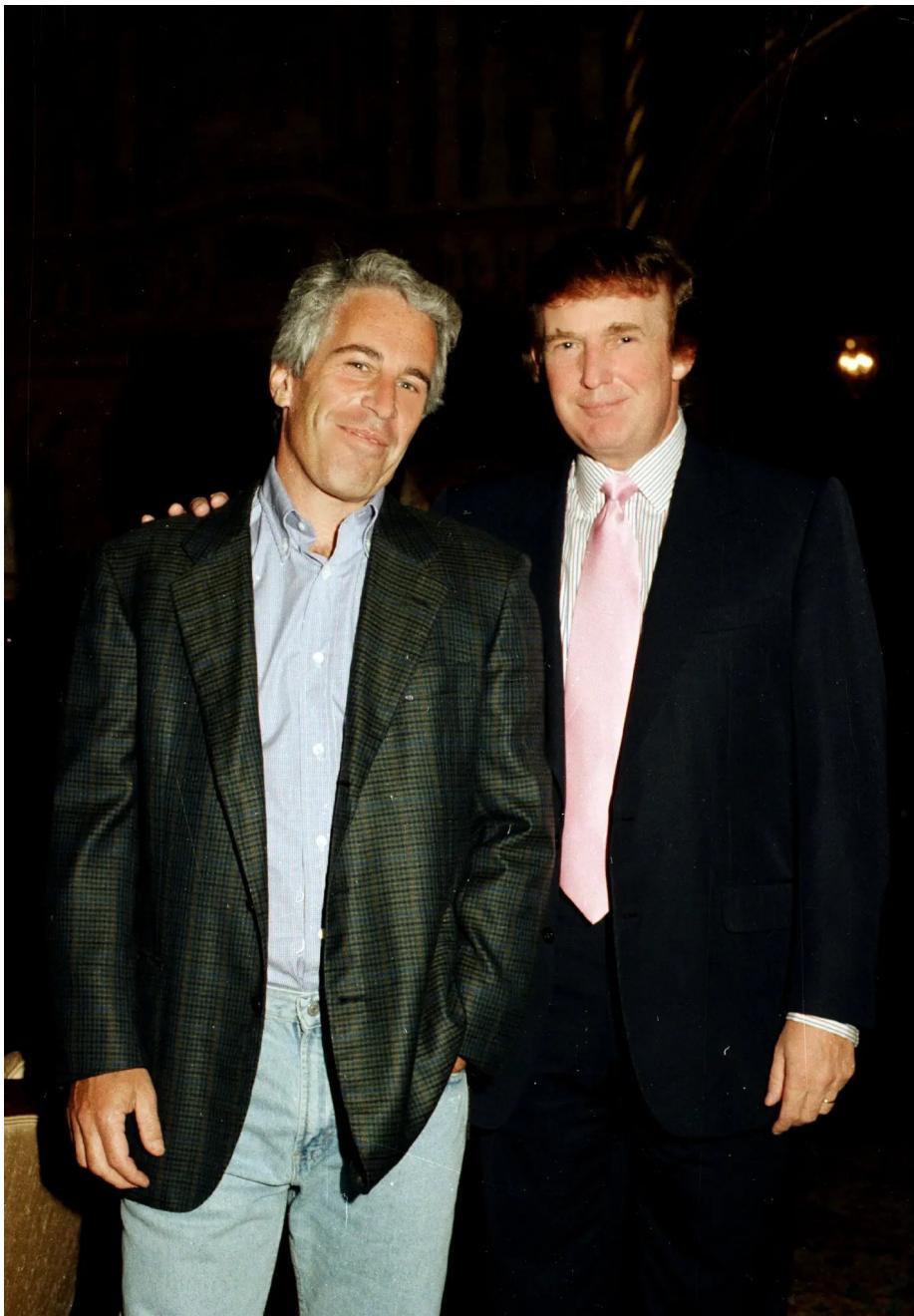
The woman who attended four parties at Mr. Epstein’s mansion in the early 2000s said she had first met Ms. Maxwell at a show during New York Fashion Week in 2000. Ms. Maxwell presented herself as a wealthy, well-educated mentor, taking her to lunch and charity events. Eventually, she offered to introduce her to a friend, Mr. Epstein. She said Ms. Maxwell told her that he could help her achieve her dream of modeling for Victoria’s Secret. The three met at Mr. Epstein’s mansion that fall and talked about her career.

On a second visit, she recalled, Mr. Epstein and Ms. Maxwell began touching each other, and then her. She froze. “I don’t know if I could have moved if I wanted to,” she said. Expecting an apology, she returned for a third

visit. Instead, she said, Mr. Epstein warned her that cameras in the mansion had recorded their encounter. He insisted she come to parties there. Terrified that her parents and pastor would find out what had happened, she acquiesced.

The women at the four parties she attended didn't seem to know one another. The other men arrived individually. She recalled meeting Mr. Trump at one of the parties. She showed The Times a handwritten address book she kept in those years, containing Mr. Trump's name and two of his phone numbers. Mr. Trump did not act inappropriately with her, the woman said.

The woman said she hoped the Justice Department would release redacted documents relating to her interview with the F.B.I., which took place in New York City in the summer of 2020, she said, and in which she mentioned Mr. Trump's presence at the parties. That same year, according to documents the woman provided, she was interviewed about Mr. Epstein by representatives of the Epstein Victims' Compensation Program, and later received a settlement. Another victims' fund, handling claims against JPMorgan Chase to settle allegations that the bank ignored warnings about Mr. Epstein's abuses, also approved the woman for a settlement.



Mr. Epstein and Mr. Trump at Mar-a-Lago in 1997. Credit...Davidoff Studios/Getty Images

She has since filed paperwork to join a Florida lawsuit by more than 30 women — most under pseudonyms — alleging that the F.B.I. failed to properly investigate reports of sex crimes and child sex trafficking by Mr. Epstein dating to 1996. Government lawyers have asked a judge to dismiss the case.

“The government knew about Epstein. They were aware of his sexual abuse of minors and young women,” said Jennifer Plotkin, a lawyer for the women. “And because they did nothing, hundreds and hundreds of women were abused over 20 years.”

Ms. Maxwell is serving a 20-year federal prison sentence for conspiring with Mr. Epstein to traffic underage girls. Last July, the deputy attorney general, Todd Blanche, traveled to Florida to interview her. She acknowledged Mr. Trump’s social relationship with Mr. Epstein but said she had never seen the president behave inappropriately. A week later, she was transferred to a minimum security prison. Her lawyers are now seeking to overturn her conviction.

Rewriting History

In the early 2000s, Mr. Epstein — now extraordinarily wealthy and well connected — seemed to grow less content with the anonymity he had carefully drawn around his life and business. In 2002, practically inviting public scrutiny, he arranged to fly with former President Bill Clinton and a celebrity entourage on a humanitarian trip to Africa. Details of the trip were soon shared with The New York Post’s Page Six. Not long after, New York magazine [published](#) the first major profile of Mr. Epstein. Mr. Trump provided the headline quote: “He’s a lot of fun to be with. It is even said that he likes beautiful women as much as I do, and many of them are on the younger side.”



A protester at the Capitol last month demanding the release of Epstein documents. Credit...Tierney L. Cross/The New York Times

But sometime in the subsequent years, their friendship soured. Exactly when, and why, is unclear. After the allegations against Mr. Epstein slowly began emerging into view in the mid-2000s, accounts Mr. Trump and his representatives gave of their relationship — and its end — began to molt and morph. Mr. Epstein was kicked out of Mar-a-Lago for being inappropriate with a masseuse, or with the daughter of a member. Mr. Trump had banned him for poaching employees, or for being a creep.

The first public signs of a breach came in 2007, with an anonymous Page Six item, right as Mr. Epstein was negotiating a plea deal to resolve the first federal and state charges against him. Mr. Epstein, The Post reported, had been banned from Mar-a-Lago for soliciting “a masseuse about 18 years old.” The item appeared to refer to Virginia Giuffre, who said she was recruited by Ms. Maxwell from the Mar-a-Lago spa just shy of her 17th birthday — back in 2000, when Mr. Epstein and Mr. Trump were still close.

Several years after the Page Six item, when Ms. Giuffre had gone public with her allegations, Mr. Epstein wrote to Ms. Maxwell expressing surprise that Mr. Trump had not gotten more attention, writing that his friend had “spent hours at my house” with Ms. Giuffre. Ms. Maxwell replied that she had been thinking about the same thing. In depositions in 2016 — with Mr. Trump a leading contender for the world’s most powerful public office — Ms. Giuffre said that Mr. Trump had never had sex with her, and that she couldn’t remember seeing him in Mr. Epstein’s homes. She died by suicide this April.

In 2009, Mr. Edwards, the lawyer representing a group of Epstein victims, set out to depose Mr. Epstein's circle of powerful friends. In his book, Mr. Edwards wrote that Mr. Trump quickly agreed to a phone call. Mr. Epstein was merely a business acquaintance, he told Mr. Edwards. He could not recall exactly why Mr. Epstein had been removed from Mar-a-Lago. He said he had last seen him at a business meeting at Mr. Epstein's Palm Beach home sometime before the allegations came to light.

Even so, in early 2015, as Mr. Trump began exploring a presidential bid, stories about Mr. Epstein's widening legal troubles still referred to Mr. Trump as his friend. Mr. Trump and his representatives became more aggressive. Mr. Epstein was merely "one of thousands of people who has visited Mar-a-Lago," Alan Garten, Mr. Trump's top aide and lawyer, told BuzzFeed News. He was even more definitive the following year. "There was no relationship between Jeffrey Epstein and Donald Trump," Mr. [Garten](#) told Fox News. "They were not friends, and they did not socialize together."

When a reporter from The Associated [Press](#) asked Mr. Trump about Mr. Epstein in 2015, he responded elliptically. "He was certainly a man about town, and because of the fact that it is a small island, he got to know a lot of people," Mr. Trump said, referring to Palm Beach. "When I started reading about the different things and then things were proven, that's a different planet, that's a different world."

Interviews and public records, however, indicate that Mr. Trump at times had interacted socially with women who accused Mr. Epstein and Ms. Maxwell of grooming or

abuse. The federal case against Ms. Maxwell described her role in grooming three victims under the age of 18 between 1994 and 1997. One of them, a woman known in court records as Jane Doe, alleged in a separate, civil complaint that Mr. Epstein had taken her to visit Mr. Trump at Mar-a-Lago in 1994, when she was about 14.

“This is a good one, right?” Mr. Epstein said, elbowing Mr. Trump playfully, according to the complaint. Mr. Trump smiled and nodded, and the two men chuckled, the victim said. Her case ended in a settlement with Mr. Epstein’s estate. In 2021, testifying at Ms. Maxwell’s trial, she said she competed in Mr. Trump’s Miss Teen USA pageant.

Jack O’Donnell, who ran the Trump Plaza in Atlantic City for several years and later wrote a critical book about Mr. Trump, recalled in an interview that Mr. Trump once arrived at the casino after midnight one Sunday in September 1989 with Mr. Epstein and three young women. A state gambling inspector recognized one of the women as the tennis star Gabriela Sabatini, who at 19 was too young to legally enter the casino. In a call that Monday, the inspector told Mr. O’Donnell that all the women looked “very young,” he said. Soon after, Mr. O’Donnell called Mr. Trump to flag the issue.

“Yeah, Jeffrey likes them young,” Mr. Trump said, Mr. O’Donnell recalled in a recent interview. “Too young for me.” Mr. O’Donnell previously described the episode in *Slate*; the White House called his account a fabrication. Efforts to reach Ms. Sabatini were unsuccessful.

Whatever the cause of their later falling-out, Mr. Epstein remained obsessed with Mr. Trump. In the years after their

last known contact, he exchanged hundreds of emails with others mentioning his former friend. As Mr. Trump's political career took flight in the mid-2010s, Mr. Epstein's umbrage seemed to grow. Even as he maneuvered to regain influence within Mr. Trump's world, he mocked and criticized him in private, calling him "nuts" and "evil beyond belief," according to the emails released by Congress.

He resented Mr. Trump's efforts to distance himself, the emails show. His older, smoother former friend seemed untouchable, while he was enveloped in scandal once again, as more and more victims came forward with their accounts of abuse. In an interview taped by Mr. Wolff in 2017 and published by The Daily Beast last year, Mr. Epstein described what he said was Mr. Trump's technique for trying to bed the wives of friends. Mr. Wolff asked how he had such intimate knowledge of Mr. Trump. "I was Donald's closest friend for 10 years," Mr. [Epstein](#) replied.

In emails, he hinted to friends that he could take Mr. Trump down. He didn't say how.

Reporting was contributed by Rebecca R. Ruiz, Matthew Goldstein, David Enrich and Steve Eder.

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